

# Editorial Note

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In many ways this journal issue presents some remnant fruits of a conference entitled *Engaging the Contemporary 2019: The Philosophical Turn Towards Religion*, and convened by the Department of Philosophy, at the University of Malta, on the 7–8 November 2019. The conference featured almost seventy papers on topics which ranged very widely from metaphysics to epistemology, from ethics to politics, and from phenomenology to analytic philosophy. Indeed, the conference was a living witness to the immense fecundity of the philosophy of religion.

I stated above that this issue is a remnant. It is so because it presents just one eighth of the proceedings on offer at the conference. Even so, and even if they were not consciously chosen to form part of this journal issue as a remnant, the papers do constitute a kind of microcosm of the conference and, I would say, of the state of philosophy of religion at present.

At first sight, these papers are a melange of topics and views; they constitute a kind of pastiche. And this shows vividly that, on the one hand, the philosophy of religion is unusual in that it touches on most, if not all, parts of philosophy and aspects of human life. Indeed, there seems to be no part of philosophy which is not informed by some connection with the philosophy of religion. And this is perhaps not surprising. After all, one's views on the divine are bound to impact everything in one's life. In particular, one's views on the divine are bound to be intertwined with one's views on oneself, on society, and on nature. The range of views, on the other hand, also bears testimony to the peculiar nature of the philosophy of religion: it is inextricably personal. That is, one's views, expressed in the philosophy of religion, are not simply abstract views. They bear the hallmark of the personal. They say something about the author in a manner that one's views on, say, logic do not.

But this first sighting which sees a mere medley is, in many ways, deceiving. For, at a closer look, one realises that there are themes and *metaxu* which are present, perhaps beneath the surface, in all nine papers. One

can state that all papers are engaging with what William Desmond, in his *Ethics and the Between* (2001) averred: that beyond immanent excellence we are pointed to some sense of transcendent worth, expressed in the community of agapeic service. Indeed, one can consider this to be the theme of this issue.

One such *metaxu* present in the papers is the engagement of the immanent and the transcendent—all papers dance in different styles in between the concreteness of immanence and the yearning for transcendence. Another *metaxu* present in each of the papers is the encounter between the cataphatic and the apophatic—the themes are all liminal and involve the stretching of language and this distension of language is an evocative expression of our desire for the ineffable. Indeed, these papers all hearken to the analogical—a way of speaking which is neither the univocal, mathematical manner so beloved of the sciences, nor is it the metaphorical poetic expression so vitally present in literature. Analogy is *metaxu* in combining sameness and difference and bears witness to the plurivocality-cum-intimacy of being: we experience anything as being both similar to anything else and unique; we seek both to know things intimately while seeing them as pointing beyond themselves; we concurrently know both our inner world and our outer experience; and, we are able to both empathise and sympathise with others. All the papers position themselves somewhere *metaxu*, even if in rather different ways.

The whole range of papers also bears witness that metaxological speech-cum-silence is always at least implied and, indeed, is present behind the scenes of our lives.

The first paper is by WOJCIECH SZCZERBA and bears testimony to the seminality of the notion of *imago Dei*. The paper traces the way in which humankind and, indeed, every human being is a symbol of God. Through an examination of the work of Gregory of Nyssa who understands the *imago Dei* in a substantial, a relational, and a functional manner, the author argues for an inclusivist theology. Szczerba develops this through a presentation of the thought of Jürgen Moltmann who understands *imago Dei* theologically. Moltmann reflects on the open Trinity who created and shapes humanity so that the human being has a relational communal inclination and shows how the *imago Dei*, through the transformation begotten by the *imago Christi*, is “destined” to become the *gloria Dei*. Szczerba wants to aver that the fact that every human being is a unique mirror of God is significant—and perhaps indispensable—in fighting racism and nationalism and is at the root of cries for inclusion and recognition of human dignity. The *imago Dei* is a way of seeing every human person—and humanity as a whole—as being

radically and continuously—even if unbeknown to himself or herself—in some kind of relationship with God.

The paper by TYRONE GRIMA takes up Simone Weil's attitude of attention to God as she patiently waits. She speaks of the relationship with God in terms of both the personality of the impersonal, and the impersonality of the personal. Here the apophatic strongly comes to the fore within the aforementioned *metaxu* between the apophatic and the cataphatic. What matters is not whether bread exists or what it might be but that we are hungry. This means that we are never comfortable in our relationship with God nor, indeed, in our ordinary personal relationships. We are called to live a kind of *coincidentia oppositorum* which means that our relationships need to mature beyond the personal, through the impersonal typified by the Good Samaritan's helping a person who remains a stranger, to a point where the personal and the impersonal are integrated and intertwined. In many ways this paper stresses the apophatic and can be viewed profitably in conjunction with the previous paper which is more serenely cataphatic.

The third paper is by NEAL DEROO, who speaks in a phenomenological key. Using the work of Michel Henry and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, he argues that religion and spirituality are really distinct: spirit is expressed in religion, but also in art, ethics and cuisine. DeRoo holds that the religious expression of spirit can be broken down into four levels of phenomenological analysis: we need to distinguish between spirituality and religiosity; between religiosity and particular religious institutions or traditions; and between the latter and actual concrete phenomena such as beliefs, objects, rituals, or practices and so forth. It is argued that these four layers are phenomenologically distinct and that recognition of such a distinction allows for a broader and deeper view of religion. Finally, it is proposed that recognising these distinct levels of phenomenological analysis leads to the surview of the philosophy of religion in terms of not less than four distinct philosophical tasks: a philosophy of spirituality; a philosophy of religiosity; a philosophy of particular religious traditions or institutions (such as a philosophy of Christianity); and a philosophical exploration of concrete religious phenomena—through a philosophical theology that could also include a phenomenology of particular religious experiences. This is a rich paper with many possible fruitful developments; one question left hanging, however, has to do with the relationship between religion and spirituality.

Religion and spirituality come together in a more serene way in the paper penned by ROBERT FARRUGIA even if, this time, he attempts to overcome the schism between the spiritual and the world present in Michel Henry's phenomenology. Henry's phenomenology of Life is a radically immanent,

interior auto-affection, wholly separate from the Husserlian transcendent view of intentionality. Farrugia shows that, despite Henry's engagement with Christianity, his view of a radical fracture between Life and world is completely discordant with an orthodox understanding the central Christian doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity: Henry's of radical distinction between invisible/subjective flesh (*Leib*) and visible/objective body (*Körper*) distorts the doctrine of the Incarnation while the same radical separation also means that there is no possibility of any bridge between an unthematic and thematic knowledge of God, nor is there any possibility of God's revealing Godself in the world. Through a consideration of Edith Stein's work, Farrugia argues that one must recognize that transcendence is always already part of our fabric of interiority; the external world cannot be divorced from the interior Life. It seems to be necessary, after all, that transcendence be already present within immanence. Perhaps the greatest value of this paper is that it shows some costs involved in restricting oneself to the sphere of radical immanence.

The fifth paper, by ZUZANA SVOBODOVÁ, remains firmly within a phenomenological key while stressing the vital importance of the open soul. It presents us with a close reading of the work of Jan Patočka on "movement" while reflecting upon our existential and metaphysical responsibilities as we strive to seek integrity and authenticity. Patočka, while considering Aristotle's view of movement as far richer than the view of the same in modern philosophy, radicalises even the Stagirite's view to include the possibilities that come from the future in human life. Svobodová describes how Patočka moves from the movement of acceptance characterised by all kinds of contingencies and whose time is the past, through the movement of self-projection marked by conflict, suffering and guilt and whose time is the present, to the movement of integrity and authenticity which leads to care for the soul and whose time dimension is the future. There is a beautiful discussion of the open soul: one is not to seek to possess but rather to sacrifice, care and even give oneself to others. Interesting here are the links made between *aletheia*, *scholē*, *dialogos*, *kairos* and *metanoia*. The context is firmly Christian and inspirational: Patočka illumined many who hailed from numerous and diverse spheres of life—it is perhaps sufficient to mention both Havel and Derrida.

With the sixth paper, we move from phenomenology to analytic philosophy and we come to a consideration of the problem of suffering from the point of view of the specific question of the problem of hell. ALEX R GILLHAM, in an admirably clear paper, sets out the question and then discusses four traditional resolutions: the Free Will Defense, the Retributivist View,

Universalism, and Annihilationism, which solutions he finds all wanting. He then sets up the proposal that Hell is possibly unpopulated and seeks to defend this possibility against objections such as the absurdity of empty threats, the meaninglessness of a created yet empty hell, the dignity of human freedom, and the justice of God. This paper is admirable for its analytical clarity and yet displays a kind of lack which is instructive for a reflection on method in our subject: in its attempt to take a detached analytic stance, the paper does not perhaps do justice to the multilayered, symbolic nature of our lives in general and of religious discourse in particular.

The seventh paper by LUCA SINISCALCO certainly aims to make up for this seeming cognitive hemianopia in focussing on the symbolic and mythical kind of hermeneutic method needed to do philosophy of religion. This he does through an extensive reflection on the theoretical *Weltanschauung* of *Antaios* (1959–71), the German journal directed by Mircea Eliade and Ernst Jünger. This project, which was really a kind of philosophical experiment, was based on an analogical interpretation of the world. The attempt was to reunify the multileveled richness of meaning, which modernity had divided, through a sustained gaze at the paradoxical “transcendent immanence” of our experience. The project sought to bring together internal and external, subject and object, idea and matter, transcendence and immanence, fragment and totality. Interestingly, this opens a particular space for truth in its “eventual” dimension to emerge. Putting aside the rather pantheistic slant of the project, we find such fascinating views as an openness to the mysterious and meta-rational, a comprehension that reality is deep and that immanence is intertwined with transcendence, an overcoming of dualism through *coincidentia oppositorum*, a consideration of the vital importance of the aesthetic, existential and the hermeneutical in our receptivity before reality, an interest in religious metaphysics, and a reflection on the epochal significance of our cultural apophaticism. *Antaios* is therefore presented as a great “building site” of a hermeneutical phenomenology of religions—a wonderfully rich counterbalance to the analytic approach. However, it also constitutes an approach which risks losing itself in the multiplicity of significances rather than in the clarity of reason; in the realm of meaning rather than the rigour of truth. It is an approach which risks a certain kind of “internalism” where it is claimed that the considerations being made can only be understood and evaluated within the sphere of human life that is religious experience.

Clearly, both the analytic approach in the previous paper and the symbolic, continental approach have numerous strengths in themselves, but also much to learn from one another. It appears clear that we must pay

attention to the culture, context and practices within which our lives are embedded. But we must also hearken to the voice of critical reflection. In our approaches to religion we need to be both porous and critical, both holistic and analytical.

The final two papers examine the perennial question of the link between religion, morality and politics.

An empiricist kind of analytic approach is evident in the paper by ANDREI G. ZAVALIY which examines what he calls a "Theory of Religious Dependence" with respect to morality. After making a useful distinction between an epistemological, a semantic, and a psychological kind of dependence, he homes in on the latter. His framework is an externalist Humean view of motivation—emotions are seen as non-cognitive states—and his method is empiricist and statistical. In this light, Zavaliy considers three emotions—fear, guilt and gratitude—and examines both their efficacy and their appropriateness as moral motivators. His argument raises interesting points—like the remark that fear tends to increase aggressiveness—but seems, at times, to be remarkably blunt. For instance, at one point he takes it for granted that, in Donald Hubin's words, "acts of morally laudable, altruistic, genuine self-sacrifice are not consistent with the thesis of theism." His conclusion is that fear, guilt and gratitude can be elicited by purely secular conditions and, moreover, that any appeal to a supernatural being in terms of moral motivation is superfluous. The paper is clear and the argument is easy to follow but it does leave one to reflect on what Dostoevsky meant when he stated—as quoted in the paper itself—that "If God does not exist, then everything is permitted." Is it really so obvious that he is wrong? And could an answer to such a question be determined by empirical research that is, by its very nature, so short sighted in that it seems to ignore the fact that religion is present in our culture in such a way that Sartre had famously opined "We are all Catholics"?

The last paper in this issue is by CALVIN D. ULLRICH and considers the relevance of a Levinasian ethics of alterity to a political theology. After having discussed Derrida's response to Schmitt in terms of the undecidability of justice and the coming messianic horizon, Caputo's "theology of event" is presented. It is considered in terms of an alleged "materialist turn" in Caputo's mature thought and considered to be the beginning of a "radical political theology" which represents a passage from "theopolitics" (ethics) to "theopraxis" (politics). The aim is to reduce the political gap between undecidability and the decision. This is, in the end, a theology of immanence and raises questions as to the ability to navigate ethically the vicissitudes in the political arena. The author rightly sees that such a

radically immanent approach is not sufficient and proposes that Simon Critchley's anarchic realism—which is a continual interruption of the totality of society by ethical transcendence—can come to the rescue in sustaining a programme of inventive and creative political interventions and even a theology of resistance. While it is appreciable that Ullrich sees that a plane of immanence cannot sustain a bridge across the gap between ethics and politics, it is hard to see how he can defend Critchley's "politics of ethical difference" against calls that what he is proposing is a form of political nihilism. In a nutshell, it appears that the transcendence he puts forward in terms of a "meta-political ethical moment" is far too weak to sustain the project. The reflection on "nomination" is surely highly significant but, while to say that "a deployment of a politics of subversion that is bound to a hyperbolic demand of responsibility—the event/call that issues from a situation of injustice" is very meaningful, it is surely insufficient to sustain a persistent and ongoing ethico-political response.

I end this grand tour of these texts—which are both remnant and liminal—with an invitation to taste and enjoy their fruits which are, simultaneously, seeds. I encourage the reader to engage with them with an attitude of porousness and reflection, of attention and patience, of presence and yearning.